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Deposited in DRO:

17 September 2020

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Roberts, N. and Donovan, C. and Durey, M. (2022) 'Gendered landscapes of safety: how women construct and navigate the urban landscape to avoid sexual violence.', *Criminology and criminal justice*, 22 (2). pp. 287-303.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895820963208>

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Gendered landscapes of safety: How women construct and navigate the urban landscape to avoid sexual violence

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Abstract

This article presents findings from an online survey gathering quantitative and qualitative data from men and women students at a university in the north of England in 2016. The survey explored their perceptions of safety and experiences of interpersonal violence during their time as a student, both on and off campus. We show how women were more likely to report sexual violence compared to men. We also show how women students, compared to men, were less likely to say they never felt unsafe as they moved away from the university into the city, and as they moved from day into night. We illustrate how interconnecting factors construct women's perceptions of safety, and subsequently, how locations perceived as unsafe 'hotspots', become physical barriers impeding women's access to public and educational spaces. Consequently, we outline measures to enhance women's safety whilst at university.

Key words

Sexual violence, women students, urban landscape, perceptions of safety, strategies of safety

Introduction

This article is about how women's behaviour is regulated in public spaces by the actual and perceived threat of men's sexually violent behaviours. While serious sexual violence, such as rape and sexual assault, is most often carried out by known men (Ministry of Justice, 2013) in private spaces (Pain, 1991; Calkins et al., 2015; Waterhouse et al., 2016), the majority of verbal and physical sexual harassment to which women are exposed occurs in public places and is committed by men, who are strangers (Kelly, 1988; Pain, 1991; Vera-Gray, 2018). Research on university students shows that some women regularly report experiencing sexual harassment and sexual assault, in public places on and off campus (Roberts et al., 2019; Stenning et al., 2013). In NUS (2011) research with 2,058 women, 68% of students had experienced, verbal and physical sexual harassment, including flashing, groping and unwanted sexual comments, within and outside their institution and almost one in four women reported they had experienced unwanted sexual contact. Such research has fuelled student-led campaigns, which call for 'Zero Tolerance to Sexual Harassment' (Universities UK, 2016:34). Yet, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2019:3) states that 'it is astonishing that the most common

form of violence against women—sexual harassment—is currently almost entirely overlooked’ in the *Violence Against Women and Girls* government’s strategy. Radical feminist writers argue that such sexual violence against women serves to reflect and reinforce patriarchal relations and a patriarchal social order, in which men, as a sex-class wield power over women (Walby, 1990; Radford and Stanko, 1996). Moreover, because the media amplifies the use of sexual violence by some men, the perceived threat of serious sexual violence becomes sufficient to regulate women’s use of public spaces and their behaviour in such spaces (Pain, 1991; Mehta, and Bondi, 1999; Walby, 1990), particularly at night (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Valentine, 1988). The article begins by unpacking more broadly the impact of the threat of others, particularly predatory men in public places, and especially in the night-time, on women’s perceptions of safety and subsequent behaviours. This is followed by a review of the research literature on students’ perceptions of safety and strategies of safety. After this, we outline our methods and sample for the study, who are university students in the north of England. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, we sought to find out about students’ experiences of interpersonal violence and about their perceptions of safety. We present an analysis and discussion of our findings, and the implications of these for policies, practices and research.

Gendering the Urban Landscape: The Threat of Others in the Night-Time

Discourses about the threat faced by those abroad in the night-time are both gendered and embodied in 'the stranger'. Conservative family values perceive threats to the family as external and thus perpetuate 'stranger danger' (Chenier, 2011). Such political rhetoric encourages us to be wary of strangers and to avoid them (Sparks et al., 2001). Media representations can also reaffirm these political messages of danger, acting as a tool to control populations (Walby, 1990). Walby (1990: 140) argues that the media enables a 'public discourse on rape as a form of control over women'. This is because stories about sexual violence are over-reported and misrepresented in the media because of their newsworthiness (Jewkes, 2015; Walklate, 1997). Repeated media portrayals of the 'classic rape' trope - a stranger in the street attacking a woman at night (Kelly, 1988), combined with women's collective experiences, are instrumental in women's constructions of danger (Lupton, 1999). Bannister and Flint (2017: 532) argue that our unfamiliarity with certain social groups due to our fleeting engagement with them, 'leads us to "stereotype" the *threat* posed by any encounter with members of that group based on the actual behaviour or the (media) portrayal of individuals comprising that group' (their emphasis). In the gendered story of danger on the streets, the stereotype can be understood as the strange man in public spaces, especially but not exclusively, at night. Lupton's (1999) research in Australia found women fear sexual attack at night by a stranger (see also Mehta and Bondi, 1999). Younger women's fears were exacerbated by

the fact that they regularly experienced sexual harassment in public places from men who were strangers. Consequently, ‘everyday’ experience reinforced and sensationalised by media discourses serve to instil in women a perception that public space is not wholly safe for them (Lupton, 1999).

Bannister and Flint (2017: 532) also argue ‘the very presence of certain social groups serves to act as a “metaphor” for the relative powerlessness of the observer’. Women may feel powerless in the presence of men because they may perceive they are unable to defend themselves from attack (Valentine, 2001) and escape to others (Fisher and Nasar, 1992; Nasar and Fisher, 1992). This powerlessness of women is heightened by the gendered space of the night-time because it is occupied less frequently by other women (Valentine, 2001). In their study of two northern cities, Taylor et al. (1996) found that women’s presence in the cities in the evening hours was markedly reduced compared to men’s presence, because of fears for their personal safety (see also Hanmer and Saunders, 1984). Yet, Paul (2011: 411) argues that whilst intimidation of women by men keeps them ‘out of masculine public spaces’, the findings from this study in India, reveal that ‘a significant number of the respondents reportedly never feel unsafe in public places’, and as such, they do use these spaces (ibid: 431). Moreover, research shows that when in such public spaces, women act with agency to avoid danger and/or to protect themselves and

each other if danger arises (Roberts et al., 2019). Instead of being always and only intimidated and feeling powerless, it would seem that women are in on-going negotiation with public spaces, actively strategising for their freedom (Vera-Gray, 2018) by moving in and out of landscapes of safety as their immediate surroundings change (Nasar and Fisher, 1992).

Students' Perceptions of Safety and Strategies of Safety

American research carried out on university students has found that women report being more fearful than men of victimisation (Fisher and Nasar, 1992; Tomsich et al., 2011). Day's (1999) research on two American college campuses found that women students predominantly feared sexual attack by strangers, particularly by entrapment and surprise. Women feared being outdoors and in the dark or where visibility was limited – a place where a stranger could attack (see also Nasar and Fisher, 1992). Darkness reduces an individual's 'ability to see what lurks in the shadows' (Nasar and Fisher, 1992: 50), consequently parking lots, alleys, and tunnels, were particularly feared (Day, 1999). Other American research with university students also found that enclosed walkways on-campus with no chance of escape influences feelings of safety because they reduce visibility by reducing a 'clear line of sight' (Steinmetz and Austin, 2014: 527). In a similar vein, in Day's (1999: 295) research, bushes, trees and poor lighting obscure women from

seeing and being seen, as do the 'absence of others', especially in the night-time, and thus, they added to women's fears (see also Fisher and Nasar, 1992). Findings in Day's (1999) research also suggest some students' fear increased as they moved away from campus. Familiar places such as academic buildings where students spent much of their time were associated with safety. Similarly, individuals who were thought to be students, despite being strangers, were linked to safety.

Enclosed paths, poor lighting and visibility, isolation, darkness, men who are strangers, are 'signals as cues for alarm' (Nasar and Fisher, 1992: 49). Individuals tend to these 'cues for alarm' in their immediate environment because they feel vulnerable and act accordingly (Nasar and Fisher, 1992: 49). Women, more than men, are more likely to act to such 'cues for alarm' by engaging in avoidance and constrained behaviours (Tomsich et al., 2011). In Fisher and Nasar's (1992) observations of individuals' use of campus space, they found that individuals did not walk alone in spaces where there was a limited view and where there were perceived hiding places for potential attackers. Such strategies are thought to alleviate individuals of their feelings of unsafety when near spaces perceived as unsafe. In a similar vein, in the UK, Roberts (2019) found women were more likely to adopt strategies to stay safe on campus compared to men. They were more likely to use well-lit/visible spaces, secure personal belongings out of sight, and tell someone of

their whereabouts both during the day and after dark, on campus, compared to men. After dark, women were more likely to adopt additional strategies to stay safe on-campus compared to men: they avoid drinking alcohol, they do not walk alone (see also Mehta and Bondi, 1999; Roberts et al., 2019) and they avoid strangers. Such strategies are thought to enable them to inhabit otherwise daunting public spaces.

Methods

The backdrop of recent research on sexual violence of women students at university and the subsequent student-led campaigns to address the problem created a conducive platform (see Lewis and Marine, 2018; Jordan et al., 2018) in which to launch our online survey at a university in the north of England. Making the problem of sexual violence more visible and then more speakable can create a virtuous circle in which students are empowered to report their experiences of sexual violence in research and/or to help providers: this in turn makes the problem more visible, which increases the empowerment of those victimised to speak out. Our survey sought to explore women's and men's perceptions of safety; their experiences of interpersonal violence involving verbal abuse/bullying, physical violence/abuse, sexual violence/abuse, and stalking/online harassment; and their practices of help-seeking. Before we launched the survey, we invited some third-year undergraduate students on a gender and violence module to act

as critical friends and provide feedback on its design. Key stakeholders within the university community, who we had also invited, formed a steering group to advise us on how best to promote and proceed with the study, as well as how to disseminate the findings. The research was subsequently approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

In 2016, invitations to participate in the survey were sent via e-mail to all students then studying on the targeted campuses, with two reminder invitations sent over the three-month period that the survey was open. The reminders were helpful in generating the 1034 useable responses (approximately 10% of the targeted university population).¹ Of these total survey respondents, 70% were aged between 17-24 years. The mean age was 25 and the modal age was 21. The wider student body who were sent the survey had these same mean and modal ages. However, 41% and 59% of the student body were men and women, respectively, whereas the survey respondents were 33% (n=337) and 67% (n=691), men and women, respectively². In terms of ethnicity, 77% (n=783) of the survey respondents identified as White, which is not too dissimilar from the wider student body of whom 75% identified as White. Of the 77% White survey respondents, 64% (n=657) were White British, 11% (n=116) were Other White background and 1% (n=10) were

White Irish. BAME respondents comprised of: 13% (n=127) Asian and Chinese; 7% (n=66) Black; and 4% (n=44) Other Ethnic backgrounds.

As the research aimed not only to indicate the prevalence of interpersonal violence but also to capture students' perceptions of safety and their experiences of violence, the survey employed a mix of closed and open questions to generate both quantitative and qualitative data (see Johnson et al., 2007 cited in Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018:3). The quantitative data derived from a series of closed questions exploring respondents' experiences of interpersonal violence, and showed broader patterns in the perceptions of safety and the prevalence of interpersonal violence, while the qualitative data gave insight into specific perceptions of safety and students' experiences. The closed questions were modelled on those in the *Hidden Marks* study (NUS, 2011), and asked, for example, about the number of times respondents had experienced a range of sexually violent behaviours from 'someone making sexual comments that made you feel uncomfortable' to 'forced sex with a penis'. Chi-square tests were generated on the responses to these questions to test for statistical significance both separated in the first instance³ and overall to test for a general relationship between experiencing sexual violence and being male or female.⁴ Closed questions using Likert scale responses (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) also asked about perceptions of safety, for example: 'During the day, do you ever feel

unsafe in any of these locations', e.g., 'in university accommodation/halls of residence'. Responses to these questions were similarly explored using chi-square to test for statistically significant relationship between sex and feeling unsafe during the day (and in the night-time) in various locations on and around campus. Due to the small number of respondents from different ethnicities, we were only able to explore the relationships between ethnicity and experiences of sexual violence and perceptions of safety in a very general way.⁵ Therefore, we do not present any statistical data on ethnicity here and focus exclusively on gendered violence. Future research, especially research carried out in geographical areas with greater ethnic heterogeneity, should pay attention to the differences in experience for female students from different ethnic groups and the role ethnicity plays in explaining interpersonal violence.

Some of the data from the open questions asked in the survey about students' experiences of interpersonal violence has been the focus of publication (see Roberts et al., 2019). One open question, which is relevant to the focus of this paper, asked respondents about places where they felt particularly safe or unsafe: generating qualitative data to explain the quantitative data about prevalence of perceptions of safety. While this question specifically asked about places of safety/unsafety, respondents also documented when, how, why and in relation to whom or what they felt unsafe. This question generated

approximately 152 useable responses. The responses were uploaded into NVivo for analysis. Data analysis began with open coding – the fine detailed line-by-line analysis, which were subsequently grouped into broader key categories and from these, overarching themes developed (see Rivas, 2018). Dominant codes, and thus themes, emanated mostly from White British women students (the largest cohort of respondents in the survey in terms of ethnicity *and* gender), and from much smaller numbers of other ethnic groups of students descending as follows (albeit the differences in numbers between these groups are negligible): BAME women, White British men, BAME men, other White background (including White Irish) women and other White background (including White Irish) men. The qualitative findings we report here derive mostly, but not exclusively, from responses given to this question. Excerpts from the data are reproduced verbatim including abbreviations and lack of grammar and punctuation. Respondents were also asked questions about their use of university support services in relation to their experiences of interpersonal violence and about what the university could do to improve students' safety, which we discuss in the conclusion and recommendations.

Findings

The Prevalence of Sexual Violence

The findings clearly indicate that women were much more likely to experience verbal sexual harassment and sexual physical assault than men. For example, 176 women reported experiences of wolf whistles, catcalls or other sexual noises aimed at them compared to 13 men. Similarly, 56 women had someone grope, pinch or smack their bottom when they did not agree to it compared to 5 men. Table 1 evidences this.

Table 1. Frequency and Significance of Sexual Violence

Sexual Violence	Men %	Women %
Someone had made sexual comments that made them feel uncomfortable	9.2*** (n=18)	32.6*** (n=152)
Someone had wolf whistled, catcalled or made sexual noises at them	6.6*** (n=13)	37.2*** (n=176)
Someone had asked them questions about their sex or romantic life when it was none of their business	19.1** (n=38)	31.8** (n=150)
Someone had groped, pinched or smacked their bottom when they did not agree to it	6.3** (n=5)	23.3** (n=56)
Sexual contact including kissing, touching or molesting them, including through clothes, when they had not consented	5.4* (n=4)	15.9* (n=36)

*Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$*

Women experienced such sexual violence both on and off-campus, during the day and night, with sexual physical assault particularly common in pubs and clubs. The

perpetrators were usually men (see Roberts et al., 2019). These gendered differences are also evidenced in data concerning where and when respondents reported never feeling unsafe (see Table 2).

Table 2. Timing and Location of Never Feeling Unsafe

Area	% who never felt unsafe in the daytime		% who never felt unsafe in the night-time	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
In buildings on the campus in the city	75.6* (n=205)	67.9* (n=385)	64.8*** (n=166)	49.0*** (n=247)
Areas around university buildings on the campus in the city	66.7*** (n=180)	50.8*** (n=289)	52.9*** (n=135)	29.6*** (n=152)
In university accommodation/halls of residence	60.4** (n=113)	48.0** (134)	55.1*** (n=102)	33.0*** (n=92)
In other student accommodation	57.0* (n=102)	45.5* (n=126)	50.0** (n=93)	36.5** (n=99)
In the city generally	35.0*** (n=98)	21.5*** (n=127)	25.3*** (n=69)	11.6*** (n=63)
In local bars/pubs/clubs	34.6** (n=88)	23.4** (n=117)	24.5** (n=61)	14.3** (n=71)
In local public spaces/parks	41.7*** (n=113)	27.1*** (n=152)	27.5*** (n= 71)	14.9*** (n=76)
Using local public transport	44.9*** (n=123)	26.7*** (n=149)	33.6*** (n=88)	16.0*** (n=84)

*Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$*

Women were significantly less likely than men to say they never feel unsafe. A lower percentage of women reported 'never' feeling unsafe in all locations and during both day and night than men. As they moved away from the familiar university environment and into the city, and as they moved from day into night, it became less likely that women reported never feeling unsafe (see also Day, 1999). What follows is an analysis of the qualitative data to show why women perceive certain locations at certain times as unsafe. Six interconnecting dominant themes were identified: darkness, being alone, desolate places/spaces, strangers, 'drunks' and stories/experiences of sexual attack. These themes are apparent throughout the accounts of respondents and explained as interconnecting factors that construct perceptions of safety or unsafety, as the next section shows.

Feeling unsafe: interconnecting factors constructing perceptions of safety/unsafety

It is difficult to separate the six interconnecting themes we identify that pepper the accounts of how women respondents explain their feelings of safety/unsafety. Often rationales for feeling unsafe arise from either previous experiences, or second hand knowledge, of sexual harassment/violence in those locations, particularly by strangers (Lupton, 1999). As one student illustrated:

During my second year I was followed halfway to my house by a man who claimed to be a student at the university. He was pretty insistent that I give him my phone number and that I should contact him. This was just behind the park bit near the University [train] stop. I felt pretty vulnerable [...] [White British woman].

The location (isolated parkland, train station) is implicated in the experience which adds to her sense of vulnerability. In our research, ‘drunks’ also pose a threat to women:

i feel particularly unsafe whilst using [...] trains at night as they are always filled with drunken people that are unpredictable, [...] [White British woman].

The student’s perceptions of feeling unsafe are enhanced on ‘trains at night’ (location, darkness) because of unpredictable ‘drunken people’ (‘drunks’). There is more to her account, which we explore in the next section of the findings, but this excerpt begins to illustrate the interconnected nature of the dominant themes found in our research. Valentine (2001) argues that night-time space is produced differently to day-time space because there are fewer people about, largely unknown men. Consequently, night time space is gendered, however this might not be explicitly recognised whilst it is implicitly experienced. The following excerpt suggests the normalising nature of the gendered public space at night:

[...] In the city in general it is quite heavily populated and crowded but always quiet at night which often makes me feel unsafe [White British woman].

As the student indicates, being alone at night-time enhances perceptions of feeling unsafe because, we implicitly understand, it makes it easier for dangerous men to target vulnerable lone women. As the next student suggests, being with others reduces the chance that a dangerous man/men can threaten her because she has the chance of escaping to others (Fisher and Nasar, 1992; Nasar and Fisher, 1992):

I feel unsafe when I am alone but if I'm with friends, then I know I have a fighting chance of not being put in much danger that night [White British woman].

It is not surprising the student feels this way because young girls and women are often advised to be chaperoned by friends when out at night (Valentine 1992) in order to protect themselves from dangerous men though the danger from men is often implicit. When isolated, the 'protective guardian function' that friends bring is absent (Fileborn, 2016: 214). The ramifications of this are that spaces and places that are desolate also enhance perceptions of feeling unsafe because there is a lack of security of 'accepted others', as this student states:

I can get anxious when i have a 3pm seminar which doesnt finish until 5pm,on

an evening when its dark.I have to use the transport interchange and often i don't feel safe due to haveing to walk down the dark streets and there isnt many security guards.I dont like usng the subway, next to [name of] building,because you can't see properly during the dark evenings [White British woman].

This student's excerpt points to the interrelatedness – and contingency - of many sub-themes: seasonal darkness at 5pm, using public transport, empty streets, lack of visible security staff, subways. The physical environment in conjunction with lack of light and lack of others who might promote feelings of safety are all factors that can improve/decrease safety. As visibility is reduced in the night-time (Valentine, 2001) and 'what lurks in the shadows' is hidden (Nasar and Fisher, 1992: 50), women students feel a sense of unsafety. As another student says:

I feel unsafe in public places at night time as there is not enough light to see if there's a potential threat around me [BAME woman].

Again, the unspoken nature of the threat is sexual attack by the stereotype (Bannister and Flint, 2017): a man, who is a stranger. For some students the feeling of unsafety is not articulated as a sense of powerlessness or lack of freedom through a self-imposed curfew

but for some their use of language *does* convey a degree of vulnerability understood to emanate from the intersecting identities of gender and age. Here is one student's description of herself:

Being a young girl on my own makes me feel less safe in the evenings especially if its dark. I have responded that i feel most unsafe in public parks/spaces and using local transport and i think this has being heightened due to recent media reports of rapes/attacks in these places [White British woman].

Darkness, isolation, physical locations, media construction of safety/unsafety all contribute to the self-perceptions of powerlessness in this woman. The power of these themes of darkness, being alone, desolate places/spaces, strangers, 'drunks' and stories/experiences of sexual attack lay in their interconnectedness as important 'cues for alarm' (Nasar and Fisher, 1992: 49) that can enhance students' perceptions of feeling unsafe, and shape their everyday routines when they are walking to and from: campuses, libraries, public transport, accommodation. Key local hotspots of risk can be therefore identified that cause alarm, as the next section shows.

Physical places and spaces: local hotspots causing alarm

The physical environment produces localities of concern for students in their everyday routines, for example, underpasses/subways, alleys, tunnels, public transport, car parks, the libraries, unlit paths, the city and street. Places, spaces, times along with some or all of the interconnecting themes make certain features of the urban environment unsafe for women students. The following student illustrates this about an underpass near one of her university buildings:

The underpass near [name of] building can be quite frightening, especially in the autumn/winter when dark nights are approaching, it's not well lit and there is no CCTV so don't feel especially safe walking through it [White British woman].

The underpass is an enclosed walkway which reduces a 'clear line of sight' and thus visibility (Steinmetz and Austin, 2014: 527), which increases students' perceptions of feeling unsafe. The student alludes to no one being able to see her or what might come to pass in the underpass and this is what is frightening. Should she need help in the perceived threat of sexual attack, she believes there would be none, and this enhances her sense that she would be an easy target, vulnerable to attack. Another student illustrates this too:

The [...] student accommodation has an alleyway that you have to walk through after getting off from [name of train] station that is generally known

as stab/rape alley. I used to run through it in my first year at uni I was so scared of it. [...] [White British woman].

Here the student is scared of a physical location because of its reputation which is associated with physical and sexual violence. You ‘have to walk through’ it, she says, to get home, but instead she chooses to run: a strategy (we return to strategies of safety in the next section), which she believes will keep her safe, presumably because it reduces the time she is in a vulnerable and powerless state: on her own and hidden from view. Thus, perceptions of feeling unsafe can fluctuate as students move in and out of their landscapes of safety as they travel through their immediate surroundings (Nasar and Fisher, 1992). In a similar vein, the safety of campus car parks is contingent depending on the time of day, the extent to which they are either lit or populated with potentially dangerous others (e.g., strangers or ‘drunks’), as the following student states:

The car park areas behind [name of] and [name of] buildings because personally I've had different guys follow me from the library or other uni buildings down that road at night and it isn't very well lit so I don't feel safe going there at night [BAME woman].

Other mitigating factors can be the degree to which university spaces are protected from the presence of ‘unaccepted others’. In the minds of some students, other students

constitute allies (see also Day, 1999) or are similarly positioned as in need of protection from outsiders:

The university is open to any member of the public to walk in and do whatever they what to. Students should be protected from people just walking in and doing whatever they want. [...] [White British woman].

Thus, the library is an unsafe hotspot because of its unfettered access where strangers, who are not students, could enter. In a similar vein, local transport is an unsafe hotspot as this student, who began her account above about ‘drunks’, explains:

i feel particularly unsafe whilst using the [...] trains at night as they are always filled with drunken people that are unpredictable, also my friends have told me numerous stories about bad things happening whilst using the [train] at night, such as being verbally abused and even physically assaulted. [...] [White British woman].

Here the perceived unpredictable threat of drunken others, and verbal and physical attack at night in the enclosed space of public transport raises feelings of unsafety in this woman. The location of the public transport is configured as an unsafe hotspot also because of this student’s second hand knowledge of violent incidents happening in public transport locations. The threats here are not explicitly of sexual violence but that is not important

when decisions are being made about strategies of safety because the knowledge that any violence can take place can be enough to remind women of all danger including sexual (Pain, 1991). These excerpts signal how women students make assessments of physical locations drawing on criteria that we have identified as the six interconnecting themes of darkness, being alone, desolate places/spaces, strangers, ‘drunks’ and stories/experiences of sexual attack. Such assessments lead to protective strategies that they adopt before they access public and educational spaces, as the next section shows.

Hindering access to public spaces: physical barriers to education

Feelings of safety structures how certain individuals use space more than others (Valentine, 2001). Our findings are similar to those of existing research (Fisher and Nasar, 1992) in that students constrained their behaviours in order to protect themselves at night by walking in busy lit areas and avoiding physical locations they see as posing a risk, as this student explains:

When I do most [of] my traveling it is generally alone especially at night. So there are some area's I'd rather not walk down where i would in the day. I'd normally find a longer more lit way to my destination as I don't like being out in the dark alone for to long. [...] [White British woman].

Getting around the campus or the city is negotiated in a variety of ways depending on the time of day and this can include the avoidance of certain routes due to perceived unsafe hotspots, as this student states:

I never go under the bridge by the [name of] building because I don't feel it's safe as Ive heard of people being mugged there. At night walking home from the library I don't use short cuts, I walk the way with more street lighting and busy places. [White British woman, our emphasis].

Previous experience of assault can be a defining moment in decisions about protective strategies, even when, as the following student explains, they were able to protect themselves and do not, therefore convey a sense of powerlessness. Still it is as if having been attacked, there is a determination to attempt to reduce the risk of another attack taking place. The result is on the one hand quite limiting for the student yet on the other, exhibits an impressive level of resourcefulness to ensure that their study is not adversely impacted:

[...]. I would not like to be coming to work in the library when there was not a lecture on when I knew that there would be known fellow students/ lecturers on site, [...]. Although a mature student, I was assaulted 20 years ago in similar circumstances and this experience still makes me feel vulnerable, even though I took action that prevented a more serious incident at the time and I

am now trained in self-defence. I have *avoided* coming to the library site after work during the winter for this reason, choosing to take books out on lecture days or order electronic books instead to reduce risks [White British woman, our emphasis].

The library as a physical location that supports study was referred to, almost emblematically, by some of the women students as somewhere to avoid in the evenings, in the dark. Some of the students in our research would not walk or travel alone at night and as such, the library was avoided at night by them, as this student explains reflecting on the threat of sexual attack:

I usually *refuse* to travel alone at night because of the poor reputation of [the city] being unsafe for women. There are many reports in the media of rapes and cases of sexual abuse, as a female I feel unable to walk around at night safely. I live 3 minutes from [name of] Library, but will *refuse* to walk home in the dark, I wait for the morning. [...] [White British woman, our emphasis].

Women thus trade freedom for safety (Vera-Gray, 2018) by limiting their use of public spaces at night (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Taylor et al., 1996; Valentine, 1988, 2001). Such spaces are then understood to be owned and occupied by men (Paul, 2011).

Discussion

Women's perceptions and experiences of men's ownership of particular public spaces (Fileborn, 2016) continues to fuel the stereotype of the male stranger, who is perceived to pose a sexual threat to women, particularly in the night-time. Whether driven by disproportionate representation of sexual violence in the media, previous experience/s and/or stories about sexual violence that have happened to other women, women are often unfamiliar with male strangers because, as we have shown, they continually adopt strategies to avoid them. This unfamiliarity fuels the stereotype (of sexual predator) *and* metaphor (of power) of the male stranger in a cyclical loop. The visible presence of the male stranger in the night-time reminds women of their comparative powerlessness in this context (see Bannister and Flint, 2017), hence the adoption of strategies to protect oneself, which, for some women in this research, meant they avoided occupying the night-time. Such a strategy may be viewed as women complying with patriarchal control (Mehta and Bondi, 1999), because women stay at home (Valentine, 2001:71) in a sphere where women's interests have ordinarily been represented by men (Valentine, 1992). As such, the home has constituted an oppressive space for women, and in doing so, it has contributed to women's 'secondary status in society' (cited in Paul, 2011:415) and the perpetuation of patriarchy (Valentine, 2001). Yet, choosing not to occupy the night-time,

can also be viewed as women exercising agency by sensibly trading their freedom for their safety (Vera-Gray, 2018). This trading freedom for safety is not a linear process. Gender identities are fluid (Mehta and Bondi, 1999): women's perceptions of feeling unsafe are contingent as they traverse landscapes and time (Nasar and Fisher, 1992). We must consider the excerpts, presented in the findings, in the context of the larger survey results and remember that, as in Paul's (2011) research, there were women who reported never feeling unsafe in particular public places at night. As such, some women do occupy public space in the night-time, albeit not necessarily alone, but with others who serve as guardian/s (Fileborn, 2016). In occupying public space in these ways, women resist patriarchal control and the exclusionary effects of male dominated public spaces (Mehta and Bondi, 1999). But the design of cities with their enclosed walkways, dimly lit streets and dark car parks makes it hard for women to enter such spaces (Valentine, 2001). As such, the gendered use of public and private spaces is upheld, and gender identities reproduced accordingly (Mehta and Bondi, 1999). Women's inability, in this research, to access freely public spaces of higher education because of perceptions of unsafe spaces and physical barriers that signify danger and a threat to women's safety also continues to uphold women's 'secondary status in society' and patriarchy (Paul, 2011:415).

Conclusions

Reinforcing the picture established in other research, our research indicates that women are more likely to experience verbal sexual harassment and sexual physical assault on and off-campus than men. These experiences generate distinctly gendered perceptions of safety that are heavily influenced by spatial and temporal contexts: as women students moved away from the university and into the city, and as they moved from day into night, the urban landscapes were increasingly experienced as unsafe. The findings identified six interconnecting themes of darkness, being alone, desolate places/spaces, strangers, ‘drunks’ and stories/experiences of sexual attack to make sense of how time, space, place, and others interconnect to enhance women’s perceptions of feeling unsafe, as they go about their everyday routines. While respondents to our survey were never explicitly asked about the impact of feeling unsafe, instead we find this interwoven within women’s accounts of safety and experiences of violence, as gendered ‘readings’ of urban landscapes become inseparable from equally gendered responses to those landscapes, and concomitant strategies of safety. Future research should consider explicitly the impact of feeling unsafe on women students. It should also consider the differential impact of interpersonal violence upon women from BAME populations – larger samples of such populations are needed to explore this. Furthermore, although the pattern was not as marked in our study, it is also noteworthy that men’s perceptions of safety also decreased as they moved from the university into the city and from day to night. Future research

should explicitly investigate men's experiences and perceptions of safety and the ways in which they are both similar to and different from those of women.

The paper raises practical recommendations to enhance women's perceptions of safety to empower them to collectively use public space in the night-time (Fisher and Nasar, 1992; Koskela, 1999 cited in Pain, 2001:904). One strategy to overcome gendering of the night-time space is altering the design of the physical environment, as Fisher and Nasar (1992) argue by increasing visibility through reducing walls and shrubs, and opening-up enclosed spaces (see also Barberet et al., 2004). Other American (Merianos et al., 2017) and British (Stenning et al., 2003) research has found that lighting campus parking and areas around the campus generally promotes increased safety of students, particularly at night. Students in our research also advised better lighting about the campus, the train station, and the routes to bus stops after dark. Improving communications about services offered by campus security is also important to enhance a climate of safety amongst students (Merianos et al., 2017). In our research, 76 of the 192, which is 40% of students who answered the question about campus security services, did not know the service was available. Other practical measures should then include increasing accessibility, visibility and services of campus security (Merianos et al., 2017), such as more visible foot patrols at night (Stenning et al., 2013). Students in our research also recommended increasing

security staff, including the visibility of them, in and around student accommodation, on campus at night and at the weekend, in the library, and also to provide a service to chaperone students (see also Barberet et al., 2004).

As women's perceptions of safety are also influenced by discourses of 'stranger danger' enabled by the media (Walby, 1990), education is needed. Working with the government as part of the *Call to End Violence against Women and Girls'* action plan (HM Government, 2016), Universities UK (2016) recommend universities adopt active bystander initiatives for both men and women students. Research has shown that bystander interventions can be useful for addressing sexual violence on campus (Banyard et al., 2004; Coker et al., 2016; Fenton and Mott, 2018). Such initiatives work by active bystanders challenging the unacceptability of sexual violence against women, which in turn challenge social norms that accept sexual violence by men (Fenton and Mott, 2017; see also Roberts et al., 2019). Another strategy to educate individuals about others is to enhance greater interactions with others who share our public spaces, in order to 'decrease[s] our reliance upon stereotype and metaphor' to interpret others (Bannister and Flint, 2017:533). This can be done by creating social events in social spaces that encourage different perceptions and uses of those spaces. Some careful thought must be given to how this can be done so that women can safely interact with men they do not

know so that, in turn, women are able to safely challenge the stereotype of the male stranger in the night-time in public spaces *and* that such social events empower women in the presence of such men. This is contrary to what some of the students recommended in our research: swipe systems in libraries (which have since been implemented) and all campus buildings. Closing communities off from one another, in these ways, creates an ‘impersonal social barrier’ (Lai, 2016: 381) possibly making existing perceptions about safety worse because others, such as male strangers, are still stereotyped, as sexual predators, due to fleeting contact with them (see Bannister and Flint, 2017). Such practical, educational and social measures together should enhance women’s perceptions of safety, reduce the perceived opportunities for sexual attack, and enhance the use of public space by women after dark, and in doing so, empowering them and enhancing their quality of life whilst at university (Fisher and Nasar, 1992).

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Word Count

7,996

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¹ Useable responses are those where data can be gathered from the response, e.g., they are not missing key responses.

² The missing figures are non-respondents.

³ There were too few cases in most categories when analysed separately to obtain meaningful results through statistical testing.

⁴ Given the small numbers of respondents in the study and the small number of respondents who responded to the questions about sexually violent behaviours, collapsing categories into binaries, e.g., 'yes/no' and 'male/female' ensures there are enough numbers in the cells in the 2 x 2 contingency tables to find, generally, a significant relationship, if one exists.

⁵ See footnotes 3 and 4.